

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH ROYAL NAVY CAPTAIN NICK HINE,
MNSTC-I DIRECTOR COALITION NAVAL ADVISER AND TRAINING TEAM, VIA TELECONFERENCE
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the
Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Captain Hine, I'm Jack Holt with the
Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and the Bloggers
Roundtable. Welcome to the DoD Live Bloggers Roundtable this afternoon your
time, morning our time. Do you have an opening statement for us, sir?

CPT. HINE: Yes, I do. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you
this morning your time, afternoon my time, to explain what we do here at the
Multi-National Security Transition Command - Iraq.

As the director of the Coalition Naval Advisor and Training Team, CNATT
for short, I've seen firsthand the accomplishments the Iraqis have made in
starting to develop a viable navy and in becoming a sovereign nation. The
government of Iraq is making enormous progress in developing a professional
naval force capable of various maritime duties, including defending essential
coastal areas and performing fundamental interdiction operations in and around
Iraqi seaports and shipping lanes.

The mission of MNSTC-I here is to be of assistance to the Iraqi
government in that we must make certain the necessary steps of ensuring the
nation's self-sufficiency during this critical transition time from coalition
Iraq-led operations in support of the security agreement are in place. MNSTC-I
works as advisers to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior
to help develop the Iraqi security force into a well-trained and professional
force, one that is capable of protecting the citizens of Iraq and its vital
infrastructure components.

Undoubtedly, the government of Iraq face challenges. For example, the
drop in the price of oil has caused a budget shortfall that they must learn to
deal with, like many other nations in the world. And the global recession has
had a sizable impact on Iraq's economy. Despite the neglect under Saddam
Hussein, every facet within the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior are
making positive strides, but building a nation takes time, and we shouldn't
measure that progress by Western standards.

The coalition forces and the Iraqi government are advancing into a new
stage of cooperation and partnership. We are committed to providing support to
the government of Iraq. Our hope is to provide the necessary support in an --
(inaudible) -- and long-lasting way, especially as we transition full

responsibility of security to the government of Iraq and the Iraqi security force and, obviously in my lane, with the Iraqi navy.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And we've got on the line with us David Axe and Chuck Simmins. So David, you were on the line first if you want to get us started.

Q Good morning. This is David Axe with War is Boring. How are you?

CPT. HINE: David, good morning, I'm well. How are you?

Q Fantastic. So can you update us on equipment programs for the Iraqi navy? I know there have been stops and starts in various programs to acquire patrol vessels. So could you tell us what they've got now and what's coming down the pipeline?

CPT. HINE: Yes, by all means. The Iraqi navy recently took delivery of the first of six defender class, what we know as fast assault based, which are 30 feet, effectively a speedboat for want of a better name. The first six of 26 to be delivered, the remaining 20 will be delivered over the course of the next few months. In addition, they're about to take delivery of 24 slightly smaller fast assault boats which will support that. That takes their fleet of effectively rigid fast patrol boats to 15 by mid this year. They have on contract four patrol ships, 53-meter patrol ships, that they have contracted with Italy, the first of which is due to sail mid this year, due for arrival in Umm Qasr later in the year with the remainder following in about two or three-month intervals. And the first of the Iraqi crews are currently in Italy undergoing training.

They also have some I hesitate to use the word legacy equipment but things that they've had remaining, in particular some old fast assault boats from the United Arab Emirates that they've had over time, and they have some of the smaller boats that they're not currently using.

You're probably aware that they have an aspiration to upgrade their fleet further with 15 patrol boat which are 37-meter armed patrol boats and two offshore support vessels which would complete their first stage of rebuilding. There was a contract with Malaysia, which unfortunately didn't come to fruition. And they're currently looking at a series of direct-contract bids from countries around the world to provide this and indeed looking at FMS provision of the same through the U.S. government.

Q So what happened to the Malaysia deal?

CPT. HINE: The Malaysia deal was one that was done long before my time. About two years ago, the initial contract was signed. And under revision, the specification wasn't what the Iraqi government wanted, wasn't what the Iraqi navy wanted. They canceled the contract late last year, September, October last year, and re-instigated the bidding process. We're just getting to the end of that particular process now, albeit things here are more difficult than they were this time last year because of the fall in oil prices and the potential problems there that they're facing.

Q So how are the old predator patrol boats holding up if they are -
- (inaudible)?

CPT. HINE: They have five. They're about, what, five or six- years- old now from China. They're not ideal. They've been run very hard because they've been the mainstay of the fleet for sometime now. They are still operational, and they maintain one of the five at sea 24/7 in support of the oil platform protection system that they're currently undertaking in partnership with NAVCENT.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Chuck.

Q Yeah, can you hear me?

CPT. HINE: Yes, I can, Chuck. Q Okay, great. Chuck Simmins from America's Northshore Journal. Well, based on this, what you just told me sounds like their largest vessel is going to be a 37 meter?

CPT. HINE: The largest vessel will be the 53-meter Italian patrol ships.

Q Okay, those are 53 meter.

Okay.

CPT. HINE: Yeah, of which they will have four. And the current aspiration is for the offshore support vessels to be roughly the same sort of size, albeit, obviously, they will be a completely different configuration.

Q Right, right, yeah. Can you speak to -- one of the curiosities of the United States Navy is the number of Midwest recruits that they get, people that are born and raised far from the ocean. Can you speak to who joins the Iraqi navy? Are they all from the little bit of seacoast, or are they attracting people from all over Iraq?

CPT. HINE: They tend to be largely from the Basra area of Iraq, so the southeastern corner of the corner, and that's largely because of historic demographics. And for obvious reasons, that's where the Umm Qasr seaport is. That said, the Iraqi navy have made strides over the last two years to attract people from outside the area. As you're probably aware, there is a fairly substantial -- (inaudible) -- here up in Baghdad, which forms the head of the navy and his staff in the Ministry of Defense. The Iraqi marine battalions of which there are two planned, one is almost fully formed and the second is currently forming, has tended to take people from across Iraq down to Umm Qasr. So it's becoming more of a nationally derived force than perhaps it was two years ago.

Q Okay. Do they have any sort of marine air capability?

CPT. HINE: Currently, they don't have any organic naval aviation that's dedicated to the Iraqi navy. They have plans to deliver both a maritime surveillance capability and support helicopter lift capability. At present, that's at the requirement stage. And it may be that the most cost-effective way of delivering that is in partnership with Iraqi air force which, as you know, is currently growing as we speak.

Q Do you have by any chance the number of oil platforms or oil infrastructure sites that the navy -- absent us, how many of those oil sites would the navy be protecting? What's their charge there in the Gulf? CPT. HINE: In the northern Arabian Gulf, inside Iraqi territorial waters, there are currently two oil platforms. The northernmost one which is known as KAAOT and the southernmost oil platform which is known as ABOS, both are relatively close to the Iraqi coastline. They currently provide, depending on who you talk to, between sort of 80 and 90 percent of Iraq's revenue. As you know, the Iraqi economy is largely oil based. They do have plans for something called an essential manifold system which would be to put a third central manifold delivery platform between the two existing oil platforms with a number of deepwater single-point moorings which would allow them to increase their capacity. So while at the moment they have two oil platforms to defend, that's likely to go to three. The projected time out for that was 2010. Again, that will be dependent on budget activity. But I suspect that over time the majority of Iraq's oil will continue to be provided via maritime means.

Q And one final quick question. There's one naval base in Umm Qasr?

CPT. HINE: That's right. The naval base is in Umm Qasr. A significant amount of reconstruction and infrastructure development is currently going on down there. The Iraqi government has just recently signed an agreement for a new pier and seawalls being built and -- (inaudible) -- procedure by an Alaskan consortium, which will be a state of the art pier-and-seawall complex. And that was 80 percent funded by the Iraqi government. They agreed to the design. They have got exactly what they want. Groundbreaking takes place in the next few days, and that should be complete certainly before the end of the year.

Q Sounds like they're going to need a lot of room for all those craft. I thought the port was kind of tiny. Are they going to be able to wedge their base in there without a problem?

CPT. HINE: Yes. The current pier structure is insufficient for their planned equipment program, which is why they're investing in the new pier and seawall. The new pier and seawall will allow them to berth all of the existing craft and the forward-looking equipment program with no problems at all.

Q All right. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. And any follow-up questions, David?

Q Sure. This is David Axe again with War is Boring.

CPT. HINE: Hi, David.

Q Hi. So actually, I paid a couple of visits to the Iraqi navy. And on the last visit, it was about two years ago, one of the Royal Navy trainers raised a concern that the navy was, rather than doing its job and investigating suspect vessels out there in the Gulf and even arresting potential smugglers, that there's a lot of money changing hands and bribery. And there was kind of a broad inability of the coalition to oversee that kind of at-sea activity. Is that still going on?

CPT. HINE: Not to my knowledge, David. One of the things that we've been working very hard on, both up here in Baghdad and down in Umm Qasr with the

forward-training team is the professionalization of the force. They work very much in partnership with the naval training team down in Umm Qasr and with NAVCENT as partners to deliver maritime security. So this is very much a joint operation at the moment. We're moving forward. They are taking on more and more responsibility on a daily basis for their own security. And they are doing so as and when we both feel, so both the Iraqi navy and the coalition forces feel they are ready and able to do so. So I don't have any sort of issues or concerns on that case.

Q Okay. So the Iraqi navy is still operationally independent in the sense that it plans and executes its own patrols without a lot of coalition involvement. Am I right in that assessment?

CPT. HINE: I'm sorry, David, in what sense?

Q That the coalition planners aren't responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operation of the Iraqi navy, the operational planning. This is something that at a point had been raised a couple of years ago.

CPT. HINE: No, the Iraqi navy, through their operations commander down in Umm Qasr, are responsible for their own operation planning. They obviously liaise very closely with NAVCENT and with the naval training team down there to ensure that everything fits together in a seamless way. You can imagine that the territory waters of Iraq are a relatively busy place. There are lots of vessels trying to get to the oil platforms to embark oil. There are lots of fishing vessels. There's lots of merchant-vessel traffic. And of course, there is always the proximity to other countries, Kuwait and Iran. So this all has to fit in in terms of a wider picture. But they plan, they deliver their own parts of the mission. And as I say, as we move forward on a daily basis, they're taking on more and more responsibility for that.

Q Can you tell me more about that lash-up with NAVCENT? Is there a portion of Iraq's I guess littorals you'd call them that is the Iraqi navy's alone to patrol? Or is there overlap between the bands that the Iraqi navy patrols and that coalition forces patrol?

CPT. HINE: We basically -- the area currently still falls under NAVCENT's area of operations, it's within NAVCENT's AOA. However, the Iraqi navy provide both vessels, other equipment and personnel to support the totality of the NAVCENT operation. As I say, they provide patrol boats. They provide Iraqi marines. They now conduct vessel boards, stop and seizure independent of NAVCENT activity, albeit NAVCENT are on hand to provide advice and overwatch where required. And it's still very much a partnership. But as I say, as we go forward on a daily basis, more of the partnership has been taken on by the Iraqi navy and marines, and less is being done by NAVCENT.

Q Now, I imagine that the Iraqi navy still doesn't go very deep into the Gulf. Are you aware of any encounters, you know, tense or otherwise, between the Iraqi navy and the Iranians?

CPT. HINE: No, not that we hear about or that we witness.

The Iranians do conduct crossings into Iraqi territorial waters where they are shepherded from Iraqi territorial waters by the relevant vessels in the area. That's something that takes place not on a daily basis but it takes place over time. The northernmost of the oil terminals is relatively close to the disputed boundary between Iraq and Iran so we do, on a daily basis, have

interaction with the Iranian navy, although I would say that it's not something that we worry about at this stage.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Chuck, anything else?

Q Yeah. I wanted to ask about the supportability for the Iraqi navy. Do they have the personnel, the organization on shore to support their vessels? Do they have a naval construction, like a Seabees? Do they have the support that a modern navy needs?

CPT. HINE: As with all these things, building from a very low level takes time. We have over time inculcated a logistics corridor down within the Umm Qasr operations center. And that is growing as we speak. They have a very active (N-4 ?) section up here in Baghdad that helps deliver what they need in operational terms down to Umm Qasr. In terms of Seabees or what we would have as (N-7 ?) here, they don't yet have anything that you would recognize as that. We still provide a level of support in that. But there are aspirations to deliver an (N-7 ?) piece. One of the difficulties we have is that the Iraqi navy is relatively small. And there are obviously competing demands on what we need the personnel for. So areas such as intelligence, engineering, construction support, they are very much in the embryonic stage, but they are target headlines for us to achieve in 2009, 2010.

Q Okay. Do you have any numbers on personnel for the Iraqi navy?

CPT. HINE: Numbers of personnel? I can tell you where we are today in that the Iraqi navy currently has 1,974 people.

Q Does that include marines? CPT. HINE: That includes the marines. Just as a comparison, that's about the same sort of size as the Iraqi air force.

Q Okay. Does the Iraqi -- how is the Iraqi navy administratively organized? Are they calling themselves a fleet, a battle group? Is there a traditional Western organization for their navy?

CPT. HINE: Yes, they're taking on very much what you and I would understand as a traditional, albeit smaller naval organization. There is a head of the navy, there is a headquarters -- (inaudible) -- type staff that's based here in Baghdad. There is a base and an operations commander down in Umm Qasr. The naval activity is organized into Iraqi marines, Iraqi navy personnel. The Iraqi navy will be ultimately delineated into a series of squadrons, whether they're patrol ships, patrol boats, and then there will be a logistics and support squadron which will be made up of the two offshore support vessels and the requisite support organization, logistics organization down in Umm Qasr. And as I said, they are growing things like the enabling functions into intelligence, there's very much a very active personnel branch up here in Baghdad that's started to get its head around how it makes this a long-term, sustainable activity.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Well, sir, as we're closing this down, do you have any closing remarks for us?

CPT. HINE: I would just say that I think once the Iraqi navy appears as a relatively small force, it is getting bigger by the day. Progress is being made. We are making significant steps towards the Iraqi navy taking responsibility for maritime security, albeit that will take time, and it takes time based on a number of activities -- new equipment, new procedures, new doctrine, new concept operations. We're moving forward together with NAVCENT and indeed with MNSTC-I. There are some key events in the next nine months that will enable us to move forward even further. Here in MNSTC-I we're working hard to take those vital steps to allow the Iraqi navy to become a self-sustaining and sustainable force over time. Myself and my small team here work with the Iraqi navy in Baghdad to help them at the strategic level. We have a forward-deployed training team that helps them deliver operational and tactical-level training at the waterfront. And as I say, we work together with all of our coalition partners and indeed with other elements of the Iraqi security forces in helping the government of Iraq prepare for the future with a professional and capable naval force.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir. With us today for the Bloggers Roundtable, Royal Navy Captain Nick Hine who is the Multi-National Security Transition Command - Iraq director of Coalition Naval Advisor and Training Team. Thank you for joining us today and hopefully we can speak with you again and kind of get some progress as time goes on. CPT. HINE: You're more than welcome.

Q Thank you.

END.